

TESTIMONY OF SENATOR ROBERT F. BENNETT

Before the House Committee on Natural Resources

Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests

H.R. 1925

October 1, 2009

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the committee and discuss our successes with Utah wilderness. Because of our efforts in Washington County, the momentum to designate wilderness in Utah is stronger than it has ever been.

Earlier this year, Congress enacted the Washington County Growth and Conservation Act of 2009. Congressman Jim Matheson and I authored this bill, which was the result of the first successful regional process in the state to deal with public land use issues. I want to explain how we did it, and how the bill before the committee falls short in every respect.

The Washington County lands bill was successful because we started from the ground up with a working group composed of stakeholders. We incorporated the local leaders. We incorporated the land management agencies. We examined every acre in the county and chose places that could be designated as wilderness without creating a management nightmare for the BLM. We collaborated with groups that historically opposed our efforts. We worked with the congressional committees to come up with management language that made sense. And most importantly, we looked at the county as a whole, and developed a comprehensive solution. Our bill was supported by the Utah Congressional Delegation and nearly every user and conservation group from the local level, to the state level, to the national level. The result was the permanent protection of special lands in the county without affecting day-to-day operations; it was a successful balancing of all interests, and I'm proud to have led this effort together with Congressman Matheson.

The new model recognizes that true conservation can never be achieved with a one-size-fits-all approach, like red rock proposes. Our process enables us to develop alternatives, such as national conservation areas, in places that deserve protection but where wilderness simply isn't an option. We were able to tailor the bill to fit the needs of the local communities. Red rock is written intentionally to avoid any middle ground – it's either wilderness or it's not.

I recall a conversation with the BLM field manager in St. George while we were discussing an area that this bill proposes to designate as wilderness. He told me that his biologists pled with him to not designate this area as wilderness because it would be devastating to the management of the desert tortoise, listed under the Endangered Species Act. We paid attention, and this area ended up being designated as the Beaver Dam Wash National Conservation Area. This sensitive landscape is now protected, and

management of the tortoise will continue without interruption. This kind of flexibility and attention to management details on the ground is simply not present in the red rock bill. It is not a comprehensive approach.

The Washington County bill represents a significant paradigm shift from the past, and provides the model to follow in the future. Our success is a departure from the era that is characterized by saber-rattling and political gamesmanship, of which both sides have been guilty. It proves that if we bring responsible people to the table who are actually interested in results – not fundraising or political posturing – we can develop a meaningful proposal with broad support.

The bill before the committee is the centerpiece of the old paradigm. It carries forward the all-or-nothing approach to wilderness designation that harms the land rather than enhances its values. It does not incorporate a single element of the successful process we undertook in Washington County. It perpetuates the very mindset that we have worked so hard over the past six years to change. In fact, it doesn't acknowledge the areas that were already designated in Washington County, even though it was introduced after the president signed our bill and many of its proponents took credit for it.

The red rock bill belongs on a shelf with the rest of the Utah wilderness bills that were never serious proposals. If the proponents of this bill are truly concerned about protecting land in Utah, their efforts could be better spent participating in the new process as we move to other counties.

Some have worried that the county-by-county process will take too long. They have been trying to pass the statewide approach for over 20 years, and have had no success. While we were drafting the Washington County bill, one of their former supporters joined Congressman Matheson and I and told us he supported the county approach. He told us that the statewide approach has not designated a single acre. If timing is truly an issue, then our approach, not red rock, has history on its side.

In our process, we care about information. We care about what the land looks like now, not what it was twenty years ago. We care about how these lands can be judiciously managed. We care what the people on the ground have to say. Most importantly, we care about results, not ideology.

Mr. Chairman, the legislation before you fails to meet the mark in all respects. It does not represent an opportunity for progress; rather, it represents the entrenchment of a small cross-section of interest groups who refuse to acknowledge there is a better way. I say to them, and to this committee, that if they decide to work for a solution to the decade's-long controversy – a solution that has proven itself as fair and workable – then my door is always open. I am excited at the prospect of moving to another county to continue our work there.